

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 32TIME
18 May 1987

Death of an Expert Witness

William Joseph Casey: 1913-1987

As a pro in the business of espionage, William Casey operated in a world of manipulated fact and disinformation, a place where candor is rarely considered a virtue and anyone asking questions should be treated with suspicion. No, he insisted from the first, he knew nothing about money from Iranian arms sales being funneled to the *contras*. Even Richard Secord, who helped oversee the diversion of funds and testified on Capitol Hill last week about his meetings with Casey, could not say with certainty whether the CIA director knew.

Now, despite indications that other witnesses may tell the House-Senate Iran-*contra* hearings that Casey knew more, much more, than he admitted, a great deal is likely to remain forever uncertain. Said Republican Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont after the CIA director died of pneumonia last week, following several months of illness: "There are some things about this scandal that he takes to the grave. Knowing Bill Casey, I think he'd prefer it that way."

His public manner, and sometimes his personal demeanor, seemed designed to keep secrets. He mumbled and seemed to bumble, and wherever he worked in his dozen years as a top federal official, his desk and even his clothes suggested a mindless disarray. When the Tower commission tried to find out why a memo Casey had written about the Iran-*contra* affair never reached the White House, his aide's explanation seemed almost plausible: Casey had put it in the wrong Out box.

Yet behind the befuddled pose lurked one of Washington's shrewdest and most agile minds—an avid reader with a remarkable memory. Casey's skills at deception, in fact, helped him launch his career with the secretive Office of Strategic Services in World War II (he planted spies in Nazi-occupied Europe) and finally brought him his last and highest post, as a CIA director who particularly favored covert operations.

Toward the end of his distinguished if always faintly controversial career, however, Casey's reputation for keen intellect seemed at odds with his testimony before members of Congress last Dec. 10. To pointed inquiries on Iransecam, he repeatedly answered, "I don't know." The Senate Intelligence Committee had planned to quiz him on Dec. 16, but he suffered a

seizure the day before and then underwent surgery for a cancerous tumor in his brain. He never recovered, and spent his last months in and out of hospitals.

Throughout his private and public career, Casey had been supremely self-confident and aggressive. Born in New York City, he was a postwar success as an attorney, a university lecturer on law and the author of humdrum books like *How Federal Tax Angles Multiply Real Estate Profits*. Not a humble man, he once boasted, "I was never in a law firm where



He leaves a powerful legacy and many unanswered questions

A lover of covert action and patriotic commitment.

I wasn't bringing in 75% of the business."

In his only try for elective office, Casey sought the Republican nomination for the House from New York's Third Congressional District in 1966 but failed to unseat a more conservative G.O.P. Congressman in the primary. He helped Richard Nixon win the presidency in 1968, then headed a committee that promoted Nixon's antiballistic-missile program. Casey came in for heavy criticism when he produced advertisements for the program that were signed by an embarrassingly large number of defense contractors. Offered membership on the Securities and Exchange Commission by Nixon in 1971, Casey took the job and a relatively insignificant \$40,000 salary after explaining earlier, "I've made all the

money in business that my family could ever spend ... I want to do something more meaningful."

As chairman of the SEC, Casey was credited with tightening enforcement procedures. He came under fire in two major matters but denied wrongdoing in both instances: he was accused of withholding documents from congressional investigators probing alleged payments from International Telephone & Telegraph Corp. to the G.O.P. to influence a Justice Department antitrust action, and of helping impede an SEC investigation of fugitive Financier Robert L. Vesco. Casey weathered such tempests to gain Senate confirmation as Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs in 1973 and president of the Export-Import Bank in 1974.

Reagan, who had not known Casey well, plucked him out of private law practice in 1980 to replace Campaign Director John Sears after a dismal performance in the Iowa primary. When other staffers seemed unsure about which of Reagan's cronies was really in charge of the campaign, Casey said bluntly, "I'm the boss." He helped Reagan gain the White House, and the two became good friends.

As head of the CIA from 1981 until his illness forced him to resign in January, Casey increased the agency's budget and manning levels and sharply improved its analytical capabilities. The Company's strengthened morale began to slip again, however, after 1984 disclosures that the agency had mined Nicaraguan harbors and authored a handbook for *contras* that encouraged assassination and kidnapping. Although there were suggestions that Casey's facile mind might have been hampered by his medical problems in the last months of his service, tests immediately after his surgery suggested that he had not been impaired before he was hospitalized.

In an interview with TIME in December, Casey ticked off a list of accurate crisis predictions in regions ranging from Central America to the Philippines and said, with a professional's pride, "The intelligence performance of this country has improved tremendously over the last six years." Hawaii Democrat Daniel Inouye, who co-chairs the Iran-*contra* panel, reminded his audience last week that no matter how many times Casey's name comes up during the hearings, "it should not obscure [his] distinguished record of commitment to this country." An expression of his commitment goes on. Instead of flowers, Casey's family asked that contributions in his name be given to the Nicaraguan *contras*.

—By Ed Magnuson

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